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PLACING THE DISABLED IN INDUSTRY

BY GERTRUDE R. STEIN,

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Formerly, if you met a beggar cripple on the street you dropped him a penny. Sometimes the thought crossed your mind "Maybe this man can work." You then inquired among your friends as to a possible job for the man. Finally your brother-in-law told you he could employ him. It never struck you to try to discover whether the beggar suited the job he had open, and your brother-in-law's chief thought in taking the new employe was to please you. The man remained a day at work. For a few weeks after that, you avoided your brother-in-law, as you were not anxious for the details of the disorganization the beggar had wrought in his day's visit at the factory. This is an example of the old kind of employment work and it is the type of placement that has been made for many years for normal as well as handicapped men.

Employment work is a very different thing from the hit-or-miss sending out of men to jobs for which they may or may not be suited. To place a man efficiently means to adjust him to the industrial world in a manner most helpful to himself, his employer and his whole social surroundings. This is a big aim. It will be many years before our employment work will reach this perfect condition, but until it approximates it, it is almost as useless as though it were not done. Most placement work is carried on no more effectively or intelligently than a man can do himself by answering the help advertisements in the newspapers.

The inception of the United States Employment Service has made us all ponder on what an ideal public bureau should be. Public employment bureau work in the United States is having its chance now. It must stand or fall on its merits. I have enough faith in human effort to believe that the United States Employment Service will be successful. It can only succeed, however, if the country comes to realize its tremendous importance in our economic adjustments during the present crisis, and after the war. Its problems are

many and varied. Employment work needs the help of all the brains in the country at the present moment.

In initiating an employment bureau for the handicapped we have the advantage of having a small bureau. We can work for perfection of technique rather than for large figures in placement. In a large bureau, one is hampered by the insistence of the multitudes passing through the doors each day, and by the constant demand for large figures in statistics, and one is apt to go back to the old hit-or-miss methods. In a small bureau for the handicapped there is no excuse for neglecting any tiny detail which would prevent each placement from being as nearly perfect as human effort can make it.

I have had a vision of what such a bureau for the handicapped should be. It is not a thing which can be described dogmatically because I believe no organization of this kind is truly valuable unless it is flexible. As new improvements occur in economic thought and technique there must be adaptations. Forget your conception of the old bureau with men standing in stolid, dissatisfied lines; with unintelligent clerks filling out endless cards with material that has little bearing on the proper vocational guidance of the applicant; with the sending of workers to jobs for which they are not suited; and with the constant complaints of angry employers. My picture is a black one, but it is only because I know that with the handicapped man we must and will do something better than I am describing it.

The new bureau I will picture is one which is aimed to assist the social and economic adjustments of every applicant who comes in for work. Employment work does not mean the mere securing of positions. Any amateur can register a call for help and send an applicant to a position. Employment work means the securing of the chance for the man to make a livelihood at congenial work where he has an opportunity to make use of his best powers and potentialities. The new bureau will be based on scientific fact. It will gather statistics so that it can base the changes it makes in its organization on facts, not conjectures. The new bureau will be businesslike and efficient. It must offer a real contribution to every applicant who comes to its doors.

POINTS INVOLVED IN THE REGISTRATION OF APPLICANTS

The registration of the applicant and the first interview are the opportunities for giving vocational guidance and for accustoming the crippled man to planning out some sort of work career for himself. It is not for the placement worker to insist on what the applicant is to do but rather for him to lead the cripple into thinking of his work career as a problem he is to solve himself with the aid of an expert. The great mistake in dealing with the handicapped in the past has been that they have been led around by apron strings, and have spent most of their time in commiserating themselves upon their fate, rather than in making an effort to improve their situation. The crippled man is surprised to meet some one who treats him like a normal man, and instead of offering merely sympathy speaks of employment as an event of the near future.

There is a decided advantage in having the placement worker give this vocational advice, because he has so many instances of other men successfully placed to cite, in encouraging the applicant to think that he too has the same chance for success. The placement worker also has the decided advantage of being in constant touch with the supply and demand of labor. This advice is based not on theoretic knowledge but on the facts he gathers day by day on the opportunities in industry for cripples.

The registration of the applicant is much more complicated than in the old bureau, but it is explained to the applicant that a more effective placement can be made if the questionnaire is completely filled out. As full a medical history is secured as is possible and the cripple is told what work is unsuitable for a man in his physical condition. The home history is recorded so that the family background can be understood to some degree.

The applicant is questioned as to his education and as to any special training. Where the man desires clerical work, he should be given a clerical test. A study of the educational history gives one the opportunity to speak of the possibility of further training. An employment worker, who does not make use of this chance of inducing cripples to take further technical training is only doing half of his job. One must always remember that this new kind of placement worker is not only endeavoring to collect large statistics of positions secured, but is working rather for the best adjustment for each applicant. This point cannot be emphasized enough.

The placement worker who is not thoroughly acquainted with the educational resources of his city is not effective. What more fortunate place is there in which to speak of the advantages of further education to the adult than the employment bureau? An unskilled cripple is worth about twelve dollars a week. If he has training, you can show him that you can later offer him positions paying twice as much.

The work history of the applicant is recorded in great detail. It is important that this record be complete. Frequently some latent inclination or talent is discovered in the position held for a brief time, rather than in the one held for a longer period. If we truly want to discover what employment will be congenial to the man, we can only do so effectively by having him talk in detail about his past work history, its successes and its failures. It must be explained to the applicant that an employer is to take him because his industrial history warrants us in thinking that he is suitable for the work and that with the training he will get in the factory he can advance there.

The vocational guidance is the difficult part of the task of readjustment of the crippled man. The mere placement is comparatively simple to one who is acquainted with the technical side of the subject.

SYSTEM OF PLACEMENT

The securing of positions has become a much simpler matter now that coöperation between various employment bureaus is an established fact. In New York we have an effective clearing house which is invaluable in widening the opportunities open to crippled men. Every method of publicity and advertisement must be used to bring the fact before the employer that here is a bureau organized more carefully than the average bureau, and which is prepared to give him effective service. For it is true that a placement bureau for the handicapped must be more efficient than the average bureau, or it will not live. One cannot expect employers to use such a bureau in preference to one where they get normal men, unless their demands for help are filled as effectually. The bureau must have a file of satisfied employers who can be called upon when a particular applicant seems suited for their particular job. An employment bureau for the handicapped which does not make use of all of these opportunities for enlarging the chances open to its applicants is not

fulfilling its whole task. An employment bureau for the handicapped should be capable of securing a position for a teacher as well as for an elevator man, for a draftsman as well as for a lathe hand.

An industrial survey of the opportunities for cripples in the city must go on at the same time as the employment work and in conjunction with it. This is an effective method of discovering new opportunities. It is the most scientific method of finding the processes of industry for which the handicapped are suitable.

This whole system of placement is valueless unless it is properly followed up. Frequently a man secures a position for which he is utterly unsuited. He becomes discouraged and enters the army of the unemployed. A little reminder from the employment office just at the time when he is losing heart is very helpful in giving him a new impetus to work. The applicants should be urged to visit the bureau frequently and an evening office hour should be arranged for that purpose. They should be induced to correspond with the office about difficulties that arise in their work. Follow-up work in the factories should be discouraged because it makes the cripple feel that he is to receive special attention in his workplace. It is much better to advise the man and have him settle his industrial difficulties himself.

By keeping systematic and full records and by a follow-up system, one can gather a mass of valuable industrial facts by one of the most economical and effective methods of which I know. A man is apt to tell you the true facts about his industrial history more readily when he realizes that by giving you these facts he is helping himself, than he is if he thinks one is just making a theoretic investigation valueless to himself. The employment bureau I describe can gather a limitless number of scientific facts. In new ventures of this kind in the future, we can base our organization on facts, not conjectures, if our knowledge is honestly secured.

No bureau can be truly valuable unless it is flexible. With the experience gained from scientific facts let us hope that we can be ever changing our methods, so that some day we can see effected the finer type of employment bureau. Let us offer to every disabled man a system of rehabilitation as perfect as we can plan it. Let us feel that we have left no stone unturned to give him "a square deal."